UNITED
NATIONS

CRC

Convention on the
Rights of the Child

PRI

Distr.
GENERAL

CRC/C/SR.335
9 October 1996

Original: ENGLISH

COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Thirteenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 335th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Monday, 7 October 1996, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Mrs. BELEMBAOGO

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GE.96-18504 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

GENERAL DISCUSSION ON THE CHILD AND THE MEDIA (agenda item 6)

1. The CHAIRPERSON said that every year the Committee devoted a day to the discussion of a particular theme with a view to encouraging wider reflection on how the provisions of the Convention relating to that theme were being interpreted and implemented. Although the implementation of the Convention was primarily the responsibility of Governments, social and political organizations, including the media, could also make a contribution by helping to ensure that rules and regulations in the matter were respected.

2. She invited the High Commissioner for Human Rights to address the Committee.

3. Mr. AYALA LASSO (High Commissioner for Human Rights) paid tribute to the Committee for its important work. He was pleased to see that not only representatives of the agencies and the media were present at the meeting, but also children, since greater participation by children in work to defend their rights was to be encouraged.

4. Child rights issues constituted a challenge that could only be tackled successfully by means of coordinated action by society at large. That had been demonstrated at the recent Stockholm World Congress on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, which had succeeded, with the help of the media, in increasing awareness of the problem and in generating concrete action to deal with it. The essential role of the media in promoting and protecting the rights of the individual was now widely recognized and had been emphasized both at the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights and within the framework of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education. The Centre for Human Rights was now in the process of formulating a human rights media strategy which would help it develop better communication skills and would include the establishment of a media advisory board. A training package was also being developed in order to assist interested journalists to access human rights information and public information activities in the field of human rights were being increased.

5. One of the themes selected by the Committee for discussion in the past, "Children in armed conflict", had led to the appointment by the Secretary-General of an expert on the impact of armed conflict on children, Ms. Machel. In the process generated by the Machel study, the media had played a key role by revealing grave abuses against children. Ms. Machel would be introducing her study to the Third Committee of the General Assembly on 11 November 1996.

6. The Committee was advocating a new approach to the rights of the child, under which the child was perceived as participating in its own development and as entitled to express views and have them taken into account in decisions that affected it. It was essential that that new message should be conveyed accurately and that, while any human rights violations suffered by children should be denounced, the accent should be on respect for the dignity of the child as a human being. There was also a need to disseminate the message of hope contained in the Convention and to encourage children in their own

endeavours to bring about positive change. He attached particular importance to the Committee's activities and had designed a plan of action to strengthen the support the Centre was providing for it. In that connection, he paid tribute to the fruitful collaboration the Centre enjoyed with UNICEF.

7. He suggested that the discussion might explore three questions: first, whether the media should merely report violations of children's rights or should be encouraged to help in preventing them; secondly, whether more use should be made of new technology like the Internet to bring to light evils such as the sexual exploitation of children; and, thirdly, whether the media should approach children's rights solely from a legal viewpoint or whether it should also take account of moral issues.

8. Mr. HAMMARBERG said the work of journalists was essential for preserving the human rights of all citizens. Journalists were in the forefront of the battle for human rights and it was no coincidence that every year a number of them were arrested, disappeared, tortured or killed. The media played a crucial role as monitors of human rights violations and as advocates and educators in the field of human rights.

9. The independence of journalists was crucial and was now increasingly under threat not only from Governments, but also from commercial interests. He emphasized that freedom of expression and freedom to make profits were not the same thing. In considering the role the media could play in the defence of children's rights, the Committee was not advocating censorship, but, rather, seeking to establish a dialogue in a spirit of mutual respect.

10. The dialogue would focus on three issues: first, how the younger generation could be given a greater voice in the media; secondly, how children could be more effectively protected from harmful influences from the media; and, thirdly, what could be done to ensure that the media did not abuse children, either individually or as a group, in their reporting. He believed it should be possible to give children a voice which would be genuine and not merely a "token" voice, particularly through radio. There should be programmes on which children could be asked to give their views on specific situations, since those views would be likely to have a considerable impact on listeners. Television and radio phone-ins for children could also be developed. The UNICEF programme on the World Wide Web, "Voices of Youth", was a good example of such an initiative.

11. The Convention called on Governments to develop "guidelines" to protect children from information and material injurious to their well-being. Although laws were needed to regulate violence and pornography in the media, such regulation would be more effective if it was based on voluntary agreements. For instance, some countries had codes of ethics with which media professionals were expected to comply, while others had press councils to which complaints could be addressed. Computer devices which could be used by the viewer to block the reception of certain programmes or which restricted certain types of programme to later hours in the evening were all approaches that could be developed further.

12. Unfortunately, those approaches had not been entirely effective, partly because, in the battle to win more viewers, certain media interests had failed to respect voluntary agreements. It should be realized that the consumer had considerable power; experience in Canada had shown that television companies had been forced to take into account complaints by the public about certain types of programme. The setting up of consumer groups and watchdog groups on a national basis should be encouraged and he suggested that UNESCO or UNICEF could give guidance to countries which did not yet have such groups.

13. There was a need for further education, not only of children, but of adults, on how to handle the problem of violence on the screen; Norway was the only country to have designed a comprehensive policy in that regard. All who had a relationship with children - nurses, doctors, teachers and social workers - should know more about their specific obligations to protect the child and he suggested that training for journalists should include courses on the rights of the child. UNESCO had done much to coordinate work being done on how to protect children against screen violence by establishing a network of universities to research the subject.

14. The problem of how to avoid abusing children's privacy by the very fact of reporting the abuse they had suffered was a difficult one. The media needed to explore ways in which they could continue to expose abuses such as child prostitution and at the same time protect the integrity of the children involved.

15. The tendency of the media to stereotype children was very largely a reflection of society's own attitudes and indeed some organizations working for children were themselves guilty of stereotyping them in their propaganda and advertising activities, chiefly for fund-raising purposes. That tendency should be combated. Teenagers involved in crime tended to be demonized by the press, partly because journalists were unduly dependent on police contacts. There was also some gender bias in reporting on children and derogatory terms such as "street children" and "child prostitute" were too frequently used. Those attitudes arose in part from a lack of genuine interest in the situation of the child and from a desire to sensationalize. They could be better combated if children themselves were able to participate in the reporting process.

16. He suggested that newspapers all over the world should be invited to appoint "children's correspondents", who could be supplied - perhaps in cooperation with UNICEF - with up-to-date information on developments in matters affecting children. Those correspondents could be invited to attend meetings such as the current one, either on a national or on a regional basis.

17. Mr. ARNALDO (UNESCO) said that the presence of young people at the discussion was welcome; they might help to shed light on the impact of the media on young people and children, which had still not been elucidated after many years of research. Although two thirds of the world's population was made up of children, that proportion was not reflected in television programming. UNESCO was currently conducting a survey in 25 countries in order to determine the opinion of children themselves with regard to violence

on the television screen. It was also planning a major meeting in the coming year, in which children were expected to participate, in order to debate the relationship between children and the media.

18. He drew attention to a paper on "Children, the media and the rights of the child", which had been prepared by John Bennett and himself. It made three points. First, the relationship between violence and the media in real life was not well understood and adults did not understand what children perceived when they witnessed violence in the media or in real life. Secondly, the larger context of society - family, school and community - also had to be considered, since such factors might have a greater influence on individual behaviour than violence as portrayed by the media. Thirdly, it was important that protection should be provided both for the young and for their basic freedoms.

19. Those three points had led to the following working hypotheses that might serve as a background for discussion in working groups: although the media were deeply influenced by market forces, well-articulated societal goals could improve media quality; the greater the freedom and responsibility for self-discipline enjoyed by the media the more effective the contribution they could make to social, educational and cultural goals; child participation in the media was linked to the larger question of the participation of children in society as a whole; much more research was required to determine the beneficial or harmful contribution the media could make to children's well-being and education; and the ability of society as a whole to make its own informed choices was a vital factor in determining the kind of media it obtained.

20. Mr. IGNATIEFF (UNICEF) said that UNICEF had long been concerned by the issue of children, their rights and the media and had built up a store of experience that would be shared during the discussions in the working groups. A background paper was available which contained the many questions UNICEF had formulated on the subject.

21. At the World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children held in Stockholm in August 1996, of which UNICEF had been a sponsor, considerable attention had been given to the role of the media, considered as an essential partner in protecting children's rights and working hand in hand with those campaigning to make the world safer for children.

22. UNICEF had also been associated with a number of projects which had shown that the media could provide children with a forum for their voices to be heard, as well as a means of supporting each other in difficult times. It had spoken out clearly against the proliferation of violence in the media and the harm it did to children's perceptions of the world and to their values. Ways had to be found to protect children from such harmful influences despite market pressures and commercial realities. There was much talk about empowering children, but that should not be an adult decision alone - adults and children needed to work together to facilitate participation. Consideration must be given as to how the media could help to integrate the spirit of the Convention into their personal and professional codes of ethics. Other areas to be examined were ways of helping the media to tackle child

rights issues more effectively and of ensuring that the seemingly limitless potential of new media technologies was developed in line with the needs and rights of children without becoming a danger to them.

23. Mr. BOOTHBY (UNHCR), noting that members of his son's school class were attending the current general discussion as representatives of the children's point of view, said that UNHCR had considerable interest in the topic of "The child and the media", as it had a great impact on that agency's day-to-day work in dealing with emergencies. Coverage by the media of such emergencies was frequently vital in helping to muster the international attention and financial support required to help people in desperate situations. UNHCR was coping with the needs of some 27 million persons worldwide, over half of whom were children, and greatly appreciated the good relationship it had with the media. In Rwanda and Burundi, in particular, radio services had given invaluable help in reuniting over 45,000 children with their families.

24. There were, however, occasions when message and policies did not get across, such as when refugee children were portrayed as in need of "rescue" from their own families or the institutionalization of children was pictured as an acceptable way of helping them. The real message was that, although refugee children were very vulnerable, they were also human beings that had special capacities and resources that were best met in the context of their own families and communities.

25. UNHCR took the present opportunity to pledge to do better in that regard. It looked forward to discussing matters more fully with children, journalists and representatives of other organizations in the working groups. It was in the process of formulating its strategy to provide a follow-up to the United Nations study on the impact of armed conflict on children, in which considerable reliance would be placed on the media, and on its own efforts to do better in the years to come.

26. Mrs. PENROSE (International Save the Children Alliance (ISCA)) said there was increasing recognition of the profound impact the media had on society's attitude to children and childhood. That impact also extended to children's expectations of their own roles in life. Children's issues deserved extensive coverage and should be represented in their entirety; children also had the right to a significant voice in that coverage.

27. ISCA shared the views of those who considered that a set of guidelines would be useful, but felt that they should be drafted to assist not only journalists, but also advertisers, non-governmental organizations, United Nations bodies and other organizations and individuals concerned about children. In the Convention, articles 12, 13, 14, 16, 17 and 29 were particularly relevant to a discussion on children, ethics and the media.

28. ISCA had prepared a discussion paper that reviewed positions worldwide on the issue. In general, there was much criticism of the general lack of attention paid to children's issues and of the way children were portrayed and their views represented. Many stereotypes had been noted, such as the violent child, the poor or victim child, the gender stereotyped child or the innocent or romanticized child. Much reporting of children in the media concerned cases of crime, drugs and violence only. Children themselves, 61 per cent

according to one United States survey, complained of that situation, asserting that it gave them a negative view of themselves, while 53 per cent wanted more attention given to children involved in praiseworthy activities.

29. In a review of 16 existing media codes applicable at the national and international levels, ISCA had found that only three made any specific reference to children, and two of those dealt with children only as victims or perpetrators of crime. Although many existing guidelines did cover important principles, they were not enough to impel the media to play a catalytic role in informing, educating and entertaining the public on children's issues and making children aware of their rights. The ISCA paper put forward a number of general principles to be followed by children and media guidelines and suggested a number of means by which those principles could best be implemented in practice. It proposed action that the media, schools, non-governmental organizations, parents and others could take to improve media coverage. In preparing the paper, many interesting initiatives had been discovered in various parts of the world, but there had been no evidence that they were known to each other. Greater efforts would have to be made to promote exchanges of information in the field.

30. ISCA welcomed the opportunity to take part in what would be an important discussion. The Convention required that children should be seen as important subjects for the media, that children should contribute to the media and that they should be portrayed more accurately. Media professionals needed to break the constraints that currently bound them to markets that used, but had little use for children.

31. Mrs von HALL (Svenska Dagblat) said that, as a correspondent in the Middle East, Africa and Europe in both peacetime and during large-scale conflicts, she had often encountered children in difficult circumstances. Although it was not always possible for journalists to follow the daily lives of children in situations of social or political unrest, such an experience could add a dimension which deepened their understanding of the problems of children.

32. It was important for journalists to know how much exposure they could give to children without causing harm, bearing in mind how quickly children learned to manipulate the media. Children living in situations characterized by violence, abuse and neglect often capitalized on the attention of the media for financial gain and as a means of affirming their identity. There was, however, the risk that the plight of children could be trivialized through overexposure.

33. Enormous improvements had been made in cooperation between the media, international organizations and NGOs in the field. While there was a need for guidelines on dealing with children in vulnerable situations, it was not certain that correspondents would have the to study those guidelines because of the constraints under which they worked. The guidelines should therefore be sent to news editors, who could study them and would then be in a position to revise copy submitted by correspondents on the basis of an established code of ethics. It was nevertheless unlikely that media organizations would have enough resources to appoint correspondents reporting exclusively on issues related to children.

34. The CHAIRPERSON, stressing the need for balance in media coverage of child-related issues, said that the contributions of journalists could be used in further discussions by the Committee on children and the media.

35. Mrs. PETERS (International Federation of Journalists) said it was important to remember that journalists operated under many constraints, including those imposed by Governments and the market, and that those constraints influenced the way in which the media treated the question of ethics and child-related issues. There was room for the adoption of practical initiatives to increase the participation of children in the media. Proposals for action included media literacy programmes, the establishment of children's pages in newspapers, special programmes involving youth magazines and television and radio broadcasts targeting young audiences.

36. It was also important to increase journalists' and editors' awareness of how they could communicate with children. Time was a key element. Private and State-owned media organizations had to give journalists the opportunity and the time, which implied adequate resources, to adopt approaches to stories which built up children's confidence to express themselves eloquently and effectively.

37. In discussing harmful influences on children, it must be borne in mind that the content of the electronic and written press reflected the interests of viewers and readers. What needed to be dealt with were the reasons why violence and pornography, for example, appealed to the public.

38. Codes of conduct and guidelines for journalists were usually formulated by trade unions and professional associations and, as such, did not specifically deal with the rights of the child. Consequently, every effort should be made to find innovative ways of applying codes of ethics in all aspects of media activities and to encourage journalists to think about the impact and consequences of their reporting.

39. Respect for the integrity of the child in media reporting was threatened by the influence of commercial imperatives on editorial decision-making and hypocrisy in some of those who claimed to speak on behalf of children. Editorial independence was therefore crucial to ensuring respect for the integrity of children. Public service media could play an important role in that regard by providing investigative reports on issues related to children. Journalistic professionalism, which included concern for accuracy, would help combat stereotypes.

40. The CHAIRPERSON thanked the participants for their contributions and suggestions and invited them to continue the discussions in working groups.

The meeting rose at 11.45 a.m.